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## A Journey of How The First Arab Immigrants Assimilated into American Cultures: A Sociocultural Study in Alixa Naff's Collection

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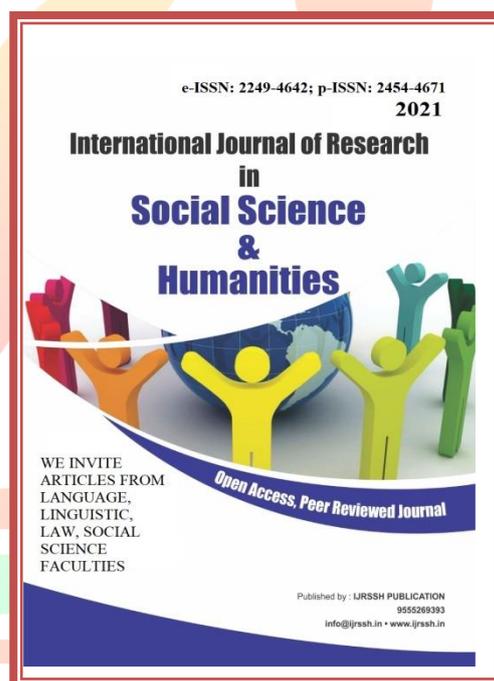
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## ABSTRACT

Immigration from one location to another in search for a better life has been an ongoing human process. The process, as a matter of fact, began before the WWI and it continues till now. It was dramatically increased during the era of the wars. Early immigrations involved unskilled and illiterate people whose common labor was peddling. Peddling vastly enabled immigrants assimilate into American multi-cultures. It is the base on which the history of Arab American is documented. The paper is aimed to discuss the concept of immigration first, investigating the three distinctive waves of Arab immigrants to the United States, focusing on early migrations and early American cultures, the act of peddling, and how Arab immigrants assimilated to the American society. The study will answer the questions: How did Alixa Naff become American? What experience did she lead? And how did she affect the society of Arab Americans? The study originally depended on Naff's *Collections* which is a key insight of experiences of the first wave Arab Immigrants based on oral real history interviewed by immigrants in the new country.

**Key Words-** Alixa Naff, immigration, illiterate, peddling, assimilated, experience.

**الملخص:** حقيقة الامر ان الهجرة من مكان الى اخر من اجل حياة افضل تعتبر حالة مستمرة باستمرار الحياة؛ حيث انها بدأت قبل اندلاع الحرب العالمية الاولى ولا تزال مستمرة الى يومنا هذا. واخذت تتزايد وبأعداد هائلة في فترات الحروب والازمات وشملت الهجرات الاولى اناس غي متعلمين ولا متقنين بل وحتى انهم كانوا غير بارعين، واعتمدوا في عملهم على التجول. مما جعلهم يندمجون في المجتمع الامريكي بسهولة و كان ذلك اساسا لتوثيق التاريخ الامريكي. تطرقت الدراسة الى توضيح مفهوم الهجرة والتجول وهجرات العرب الثلاث الى امريكا اضافة الى كيفية اندماج المهاجرين العرب الاوائل مع الثقافات الامريكية. يحاول البحث الاجابة عن الاسئلة التالية: كيف ان المؤرخة اليكسا ناف اصبحت امريكية؟ وما التجربة التي قادتها الى ذلك؟ وما نوع التأثير في المجتمع الامريكي؟ اعتمدت الدراسة على مجموعة مؤلفات المؤرخة اساسا والتي استندت على توثيق تجارب المهاجرين العرب الاوائل الى امريكا كتاريخ منقول شفويا ومن ثم تم تدوينه في مؤلفات ناف وكان ذلك اساس التطور والرقى للمجتمع الامريكي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اليكسا ناف، الهجرة، غير متعلم، تجول، اندمجا، تجربة.

## INTRODUCTION

The Lebanese historian immigrant Alixa Naff (1919-2013), is pioneer in documenting the history of Arab emigrations from the Middle East to the United States at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. She composed a book of her own and other immigrants, depending on her personal experience, collecting artifacts, interviews, and oral narration of the early waves of Arab immigration. Naff's research resulted in successfully presenting the idea of assimilation of Arab immigrants into American cultures. The autobiographical factor is very strong in the narrative collection. Alixa Naff immigrated with her family from Lebanon to America in 1921. She inherited both cultures; Arab and American. Her research became a book with vastly important real evidence, she donated it to the Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., and it is still available at the National Museum of American History as one of the great treasures.

In 1925, Naff's grandparents on her mother side, were unfortunately murdered during the International Struggle between Druze and Christian sects in Lebanon. In 1929, Naff had been sent to settle in Fort Wayne with a family. There, she developed her habit for collecting writings and clipping papers. After that she worked

for Western Union in Detroit for several years till the outbreak of the WWII and the involvement of her brothers in the war. As an impact, she isolated herself and devoted her time for reading literature in general, that was about the end of 1942. Naff lived rather miserable life in Detroit far away from her family. She lived with her half-sister, Nazha, while her family moved to India. Unfortunately, the mother died, and after a year, Naff moved to California with her father who had peddled for more than five years. Those years were really critical for the family. Naff wrote "I am awed at how my immigrant parents pulled us through those difficult times. I marvel at their native survival instincts and the strength they drew from their Syrian-Lebanese traditions and customs". She added "we survived as a family-intact and Americanized" (Abraham, 2000:210). The family values "were all drawn from Rashayyan tradition and *The Bible*: honesty, truthfulness, respect for our elders, and honoring the family name. The virtues of generosity, hospitality, and compassion we learned from example" (ibid). After that she developed her skill in writing in Arabic. She inspired her experience from her father's, asked him to document his own experience in life in Arabic. This subject was the core of her Arabic collection, a translated collection begins with "My father died in 1872 and

left my mother with nothing" (Naff,1985:2). Naff finished her B.A studied in Los Angeles, University of California, in 1950. After finishing her study courses, she felt that immigration is something shameful, she wrote "I ceased to be just the shy daughter of an immigrant grocer. I developed a personality and some confidence" (ibid).

Alix Naff intentionally visited many countries and camps of Arab immigrants in Canada and New York between 1960-1962 because she realized the importance of immigrations to foreign countries. She said: "Their experiences ... fascinated and captive me" (ibid:17). This journey was of a great influence on her that she began collecting various pictures, artifacts, and other objects rather than reports. After she finished her M.A and PhD studies, she wrote her thesis in history, *The Social History of Zahle, the Principal Market Town in Lebanon*. She wrote on *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*. About the Arab and Israelis struggle in 1967, she said "I was in my office when I first heard about the war". She was observed by a friend, saying: "Alix, you better go home, they are out to get you" (ibid: 20). She declared that she was an Arab but now American.

Moving to Washington D.C, Naff worked as a consultant on a film about the

immigration of Arab people to America. She thought about them as "neglected to study themselves". Naff was aware of Arab immigrants that she collected about them for years and that made her archivist. The collection consists of music recordings and instruments, oral history interviews, photos, and other artifacts such as books, theses, newspapers. She was hopeful that her work would be a treasure to the next generation. She encouraged the topics written about Arab American women, and thought that the 1984's collection was "more important than her funeral". What was said about Alixa Naff is that the Naff collection "holds a powerful lot of dignity" wrote her nephew (Albrecht,2015:22). Furthermore, Hani Bawardi, professor at university of Michigan in Dearborn, believes that "the body of material Naff secured will make it possible to rethink major assumptions about the lives of the Syrian and Lebanese pioneers in the country".

Naff's collection is a result of research done by herself about her documented experience as an Arab first wave immigrant. It is about Syrian-Lebanese immigrants who were almost Christians. Immigrants to Naff formed a treasure of her writing that they offer her real life discrimination. The materials of the collection are arranged according to the topic and type. Naff wrote it of eight

series, dedicated to the Smithsonian Institution, the first documented Arab middle east first wave immigrants history, named *Faris and Yamna Collection*, in honor of her parents. The collection is now available in the National Historical Museum of America. Relying upon personal and immigrants' experiences granted Naff a name; **The mother of the studies of Arab Americans.**

The paper is based on a modern approach, sociocultural which was first established by the Russian educator and psychologist, Lev Vygtsky, in the twentieth century. The approach is mostly used to examine the social behavior of the individuals determined by cultural and social circumstances; how can the person cope and interact with others and with the surrounding, and how s/he ultimately will be changed. This is featured in the personality of Alixa Naff as an immigrant.

### **THE CONCEPT OF IMMIGRATION/EMIGRATION**

Immigration is referred to by Sarah Parry, 2020, as the process through which people who immigrated to places not their natives and attained permanent residence or the status of citizenship allowing them to live and work in that place or country. Immigration is of a great benefit to individuals and the countries to which they

move to. For example, immigrants may become capable of earning life in a possible way to eliminate poverty. Likewise, the benefit for countries lies in a fact that immigration gives the country, such as America, a key of globalization in creating multiculturalism which participates to a wide extent in increasing economics. American globalization is recently highlighted; immigrants are dramatically increased, particularly, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century compared to previous times. The dramatic increase of immigrants is due to the American environment which is suitable to all religious rituals, freedom, human rights which are given on grounds of justice and equity, multi cultures, stability of the policies, and economic growth. Absolutely, the number of immigrants counted around six million between 2011-2015. People who were born in host countries were labeled as natives regardless their nationality (Hirschman,1998:45). Since migration is a global phenomenon, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) defined immigrants as non-national persons moving from place to place looking for settlement (Soach,2013:29). Moreover, the concept is mentioned by Mariam Webster as she defined immigrant as the person who wants to take up a permanent residence from another country which is not his native. The most significant case is

to differentiate between the two concepts of migration; immigrant is used to refer to the country that one is destined for (immigrant to America). While emigrant is used in reference to the country that has been left (emigrant from Palestine). Ultimately, migration is an international movement of persons or groups of persons to another countries seeking residence or naturalization. The host country usually lies in a remote distance.

### WAVES OF ARAB IMMIGRANTS

Research evidence indicated that the emigration from the Arab region to the United States began from 1880 and continues to the present time. Roughly, all Arab immigrants are historically grouped in waves according to their precedence, education, and religion. They generally did not anticipate that their affiliation to another culture is an easy case. Therefore, they settled near wide areas and large cities. There are many reasons behind their emigration and adaptation in the new land: Mostly, in the beginning, looking for jobs to earn their lives; economic opportunity. While later on, moving to another country was to protect oneself from wars and conflicts. They were discriminated in their native countries and regarded as battering rams. According to Naff, 1999, there are three major historical waves of Arab immigrants to America. The first wave

began in 1880 and ended in 1920. Immigrants of this wave were predominately Christians. They came from villages; therefore they immigrated to Boston, Chicago, and New York. They were poor. The majority were peasants and artisans, worked as peddlers in the new country, illiterate and single, they left their families behind. What was exceptional is that there was a minor group of poets and writers among them was Khalil Gibran, author of *The Prophet*. The aim of the first wave immigrants was to collect wealth for their families.

Challenges which were due to political changes, protests, and military coups that happened after the WWII in many Asian and North African countries shaped a new ideology in many regionals and led to a second wave exponential immigrants (1950s-1960s), because living in native lands became no longer affordable. Therefore, people managed to leave their houses and begin looking for places that encourage them to plan their future and grant them freedom in all aspects of life. This type of immigrants "functioned as a collective of communities whose bonds of solidarity beyond the family were mainly related to sect or country affiliation" (Suleiman 7). Immigrants, also, lost their common language. They became "an indistinguishable group from the host society" (9). They fled the revolutions of

Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq, and Palestine. Immigrants of this wave essentially differ from the first wave in that they were mostly Muslims. They were more educated and well skilled urban professionals, university students, most of them are descended from upper society classes. They settled where jobs were available, and tended to remain in the United States even when finishing their studies.

The third wave Arab immigrants fled at about the mid of the (1960s) till the present time, after the Israeli war on Egypt (1967), and the civil war of Lebanon (1975). This group also includes Iraqi immigrants because of the war of the Gulf (1980-1988). This group is rather different in that the immigrants are highly educated and democratic. They are of higher social ranks. Religious diversity can be seen everywhere. After it was Christianity, there would be Muslims, Christians, and Jewish. Emigrants fled from Arab Homeland are mainly postgraduate philosophers, doctors, professors, and this type of immigrants is still flowing because of the current violence which creates hard living and threatens their lives.

Accordingly, and specifically within the era of immigration during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, literature, as a means of portraying real life, was highlighted, and it was produced in public. For example, two monthly

magazines, and two periodicals, poetry and novels, besides daily newspapers are published currently. In addition to, a religious Arabic magazine, *AL-Asr Al-Dhahabi*, was established, too.

### EARLY ARAB IMMIGRANTS

As a matter of fact, early migrants who migrated from Middle East to the United States, regardless gender or rank, worked as peddlers in order to support themselves and their families. From peddling, some developed their works to shop assistants and after that, owners. What was difficult to them was language barriers, culture shock, and discrimination. That was because they were essentially different in lifestyle and culture. Naff, in her book (1985), asserted that the main reason behind early waves migrations is economics. Whereas Younis (1995), and Hitti (1923) attributed this type of migration to political and religious factors. Hitti said: "The fact that most of the Syrian immigrants are Christians, whereas in Syria most Syrians are Muhammadn, seems to indicate that religious situation has been a factor in their emigration (52).

### THE ACT OF PEDDLING AND GLOBALIZATION

"My mother is a woman of pride, she has a lot of pride, when my father couldn't support the family enough working as a

peddler himself my mother had to join him and work as a peddler because our family needed help so she had to work in other to support our family" (Naff ,1985).

Working for a long time along the country roads, carrying certain tools, aiming at buying wares to support families, is really not an easy task. This work demands hard efforts and time. Gradually, turning on streets, with the passage of time, was changed into small stores. Those stores enabled peddlers conduct their works as assistants at first and then they had got great fortune when they owned bigger stores.

Peddlers, especially those of the first wave were not skilled enough to perform a better job. However, peddling is a work needs no experience or knowledge. It is merely mobility demands not enough qualified persons. Thus, peddling was a very good beginning for Immigrants (Albrecht, 2015:16). It granted them an opportunity to learn English, earning their lives, a kind of income, changing their style into a new one, and improve their labor.

Peddling, in fact, is associated with the economic growth of the United States. The hard struggle of immigrants contributed to the developments of every sector of life in America. They created multiculturalism there though they were not easily accepted

and found hard adaptation at first. In the new land, though the number of Arab immigrants increased four-fold, they were viewed as those who aimed to live off the system and labeled as dangerous. Those fears are still thought by Americans till now. However, immigrants proved the opposite. Studies proved that Arab immigrants to the United States evolved and increased the wealth, besides they formed a major factor to develop and raise the status of the country.

### **EARLY AMERICAN CULTURES**

It is fairly appropriate to say that the United States has been a target location for immigrants since the 1800s. Relatively, literature, has proved that the creation of cultures in America is an impact of Middle East emigrations. Though emigrants are affected by the new cultures in the new land; however, they did not give up their social and cultural beliefs. They tried to recreate their common habits in the new country. For instance, they practiced some of their beliefs such as singing, arts, fashion, music, and food. Hence, there was a special kind of interaction and assimilation with each other and with the American people.

Talented immigrants faced no difficulties in adapting to the new country because they were educated and learned the foreign language easily through

communication in real life situations; on the other hand, other immigrants suffered from some difficulties in doing their works because they lacked the ability to speak a foreign language, and they were not qualified enough to learn. Therefore, they felt as if they were strangers and shocked in the beginning because it is rather hard to transfer from one culture into another; from one location to another; from one language into another. Homesick is still the immigrant's heartbreak because he was obliged to leave his native country. It was really a challenge. However, there were many other challenges and difficulties.

Commonly, immigrants engaged themselves in some activities and practiced them in order to live their normal daily life and act as if they live in their native countries. Celebrating national occasions and holidays in the new country is one thing made immigrants remember their original locations. They managed to create social relationships with other immigrants of the same region all in an effort to stay connected with their culture (Griswold, 2002:14).

The integration of immigrants to the American culture occurs in different ways: The faster is that the integration of an immigrant and his family into the American culture would, with no doubt, depend on the level integrating these

immigrants with native-born Americans. To quickly grasp the language and understand it, the early waves of Arab immigrants in 1800s would work as peddlers. This act involves a lot of travelling across major cities in the United States. Therefore, Arab speaking immigrants would interact with native Americans to sell. So they were gradually exposed to the new culture making integration much easier and faster.

The process of integration started with one generation of immigrants to the next generation and the trend continued. This wave has sociocultural and economic benefits and their descendants are in the social structure of the society and these include access to jobs, schooling, and other social activities that encourage integration. "The opportunity for immigrants to integrate into a society enables them and their offspring contribute effectively to the economic and sociocultural developments of the society" (Hirschman, 1998:113).

The United States culture, for instance, if allows immigrants with very little education, cultural and language barriers attain better education, and improve their language skills, they will become fully integrated into the new system. As we have mentioned in advance, immigrants were not so welcomed at first because of the fear of being off system. The misconstrued believed that immigrants

came to America in search for better opportunities that were not available in their countries; therefore, they immigrated to live a life that was built for the native-born American.

The American culture has been evolving for so many years, even though, the current United States is anti-immigration, there had been significant changes in the culture that accommodated immigrants and the mindset of Americans towards immigrants in their country have drastically changed.

### **ASSIMILATING INTO AMERICAN CULTURES**

Immigration has been identified as a process in which immigrants and their families assimilate into the American society. Alixa Naff's research discovered a major brain drain within the Arab peninsula mainly from Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and Palestine. According to her findings, more than 15% of the second and third waves of Arab immigrants between 1965-1967 to the United States were learnt and skilled workers. These workers immigrated to America based on the countries Immigration Law under the 1965 National Act: This clause enables immigrants in the United States work and settle based on a special employment contract on a professional and skilled basis. Arabs were known for their high

desire and pursuit of education; thus, travelling to the United States provided them with opportunities unavailable in their lands to educate and develop themselves. Studies conducted in 1983 highlighted reports from the Middle East International that a vast majority of Arab immigrants to the United States were experts and Knowledgeable in the field of science and engineering. They essentially differ from the early waves in knowledge and skill.

Earlier Arab immigrants to the United States laid a strong foundation for the next generation. Alixa Naff, being a part of that generation, being historian. Since the next waves were highly educated, they studied medicine to become doctors, legal practitioners, engineers, mathematicians,... etc. These new generation of professions whose parents were peddlers endeavored to attain intellectual advancement therefore becoming great contributors to the civilization in the west.

The next generation of Arab Americans whose parents immigrated to the United States between 1800s-1900s contributed significantly to overall economic development of the country by becoming experts in various fields of study. Some of these Arab descendants are namely: Dr. Michael Debakey, a notable heart surgeon

in the medical field, a noble peace prize winner in 1990. Dr. Farouk El Baz, geologist, contributed in the United States NASA's Lunar Orbiter missions. By 1990, researches have shown that Arab Americans became very educated compared to an average Americans. They have attended college of master degree and they rapidly employed.

Immigrants, however, tried to ascend themselves under a roof of unity and cooperation. They zealously, established an organization known as the Arab American University Graduates (AAUG) is an institution that is created by the second and third wave of Arab immigrants who are educated and seek to create a platform that encourages peaceful dialogue between Arab residing in the United States and the United States citizens. This organization further shares information that will drive development within the Arab region why guiding Arabs leaving back home and how to attain success within their respective countries to promote national and regional development.

A felt impact of immigration is a stigma its people are associated with, after many years of settling as immigrants in the United States a great proposition of these immigrants and their descendants attaining professional, intellectual abilities and skills

as well as notable achievements. The American society still perceives these immigrants as immigrants, the stigma around the next generation of Arab immigrants still exists and they will need centuries for these Arab Americans to be viewed as Americans regardless the number of achievements they have attained. Such stereotypes still exist even with the existence of the American Arab discrimination on the Arab race in any form such as employment, education, and even politics (Gisele, 1994:76).

### **7-Occupation of Arab Immigrants in the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century America**

In 1900s, census records collected on immigrants, limited their work line to merchants and labors. While fifty years after, the data collected included other branches of work; the immigrants were mostly experts and professionals. However, as Middle East immigrants started getting themselves more familiar with the language and gradually setting into culture, they became more accessible to avoid work environments to grow (Independent, 2011).

These other work options were of a great advantage compared to the long stressful hours of peddling under extreme conditions and in most cases peddlers are in contact with communities that are not respective to strangers and not welcoming

immigrants in their cultures. These other work opportunities created room for those immigrants who could not earn much as peddlers to try their chance in these sectors (Soash, 2013:33). Accordingly, the number of peddlers decreased from 1900s onward. For example the number of Lebanese immigrants to the United States decreased from 40.63% in 1900 to 16.67% in 1910, while in 1920 the number reduced to 8.29%. Such decreased occurred since most of these early Arab Immigrant peddlers have grown old and retired while the new wave of immigrants chose other professions besides peddling (Khater & Avery, 2017:214).

Additionally, Arab immigrants only did peddle only a couple of years approximately a year or two to save enough capital to move to other professions. A statistic collected in 1899 that recorded a total number of 42 immigrants in the first wave of Arab emigration to America registered peddling as their profession, exactly two years down the line only 3 out of 42 total still remained as peddlers. In other words peddling seems to be a norm in most narrations to describe the settlement of early Arab immigrants. However, statistics collected in the United States has shown a minority of these immigrants stayed as peddlers, a vast majority of them went to

another professions such as craftsmen, farmers, and workers in factories.

It is important to explain and clearly understand the Arab immigrants' role and experience as members of the middle and working class. What was the key role played by these immigrants during 1900s? Did immigrants have a clear understanding the nature of the relationship between them and native American workers? The key answer to these questions enables and encourages future researchers to be conducted by redirecting focus on the history of Arab immigrants with an in depth look at their humble beginning and what started from peddling in one generation have brought up another generations that are redefining success (Gibran,1926:98).

## **FINDINGS**

Some of the findings of the research have indicated the process involved in immigrants assimilating into the American culture. The process begins when there are push factors from countries where these immigrants reside in and these push factors for Arab immigrants in the 18<sup>th</sup> century where primarily based on political instability due to the raising Arab war, Israeli and Palestine conflict which started in 1920 but immediately turned into Civil War that affected the entire Arab region by 1948. This affected the lives of people and

their families. The findings have also highlighted involuntary immigration during this period and the waves of Arabs who immigrated then. They were more educated than the first waves which were mainly due to economic opportunities available in the United States in terms of job availability, freedom, human rights, and necessities to live in a country.

The study further discovered the adjustment immigrants had to undergo and the major role peddling played in enabling rapidly integrate. Also, the study highlights the significant role immigrants played in improving and developing the American society through economic gains. Another notable finding is the creation of multiculturalism in America. Such diversity has given the United States an advantage of superiority over other countries.

Finally, the study enables us understand the challenges immigrants faced in assimilating into the new culture because integration is not as smooth as one can expect. The first wave was faced with major hostility and discrimination from native Americans. Immigrants then were viewed as a group of people moved to the United States to ripe off citizens, and peddlers were seen as beggars and as such they were treated negatively. They shocked with posts written such as "NO

PEDDLERS", "NO BEGGARS". This is due to little learning and lack of education that the natives did not understand the idea of migration. Therefore, to live with other races was hard to obtain. However, the 21<sup>st</sup> century America is still trying to make integration easier for immigrants; thus immigration after two centuries is still an ongoing challenge in the United States and one of the current governments biggest setbacks, their inability to encourage diversity.

### CONCLUSION

The paper investigates the integration of Middle East immigrants into the American culture. Though immigrants had faced difficulties in the beginning, they at last achieved their aim; settled and worked, and finally were able to communicate fluently. The research looks keenly at critical historical studies of the waves of Arab immigrants and finds out how they gradually assimilated to the American society, particularly, from 1824-1965. Similar studies conducted in the past have highlighted social changes immigrants have brought to the American society. These changes are intangible; thus, difficult to measure. Although, one thing is clear that immigrants played a significant role in the socio cultural and economic development of the new country. The American policy helped them to catch

opportunities to work. Hence, they made positive private and communal differences. Ultimately, the research finds out the process of immigration and integration to

the American culture. However, a clear notion is that immigration is an ongoing process will continue to occur even in the future.



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